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Editorial

How to manage a laboratory?

Almost all laboratory organisations, particularly in (university) hospitals, have shown a revolutionary development since 1945. This is a fact for every laboratory leader to reflect upon: the development from specialism to generalism in management. The explosive growth of the health organisation, but also of the business world, seems to indicate one solution, taking into consideration four points:

1. Earned Authority

Acquired authority is nothing more than a nomination for a certain function and has little or no value. Earned authority is obtained through functioning in an obviously effective manner. "He says so" can then be an argument per se. If this status has not been reached after 2–3 years, this is a reason for introspection.

2. *Peter* Principle

This powerful book (1) has the following motto:

"Every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence". Failure is often determined by the last step on the ladder. A symptom of this level is among others a lack of insight regarding the appointment of effective co-workers. This includes an incapacity to delegate or to bestow the power of procuration. Frequently this will have led to irreversible situations, based on power structures with repressive tolerance (*Marcuse*) which in their turn were necessary for their own survival.

3. Communication

This involves the presentation of oneself or "public relations". An aid can be for example one's own "lab news sheet", sent to all concerned every two or three months. It is very important that the contents of such a news sheet be placed in the correct context (see l. c. (1)). Intuitive thinking, based on experience, plays an important role here, as does the avoidance of too great a degree of familiarity. The teacher who faces a new class saying: "Right, I'm going to teach you chemistry, call me *Fred*", will fail via valium. A lack of structural knowledge is frequently coupled with a chaos of dogmatic statements, reminiscent of the social sciences.

4. Employees' Participation

Or: "democratic" decision-making

In every organisation this is often not only desirable but also useful, provided that the following is taken into consideration: A minimum of knowledge is necessary concerning the subject being discussed. The day of the debating-club is past.

Employees must be willing to carry responsibility for the decisions made and accept that, if every comment or adaptation requires the approval of the performers, this will have a paralysing effect.

This solution is: "Management by exception".

This is based on the assumption that the manager is capable. Through knowledge and experience, he has it all at his fingertips. Intuitive thinking, as mentioned above is important. The computer cannot provide this, being a purely time-saving aid. This basic condition is what enables the delegation of responsibilities.

Employees are expected to act upon their own judgment and their own authority in a harmony-model, up to their level of incompetence. Another all important condition concerns reporting-back, in which priorities are set. A weekly meeting of an hour between the staff members of the laboratory, (see model, fig. 1) in addition to short daily meetings, is sufficient for this.

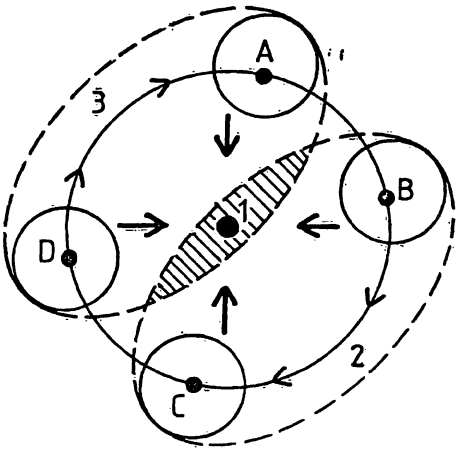

Fig. 1. Model: Management by exception

Example:

A)	Clinical chemistry	(head-laboratory technician)
B)	Haematology	(head-laboratory technician)
C)	Endocrinology	(head-laboratory technician)
D)	Radio-isotopes	(head-laboratory technician)
1)	Director clinical chemist	(head)
2)	Co-director clinical chemist	(sub-head)
3)	Co-director clinical chemist	(sub-head)

Once a month a general lab discussion should be held with an agenda and a conclusion list of subjects divided into items for organisation and items for scientific discussion, of a technical or educational nature (minutes).

The example given with the model refers to clinical chemistry. Every reader can fill in 1—3 and A—D for himself, pertaining to his or her own laboratory organisation. An initiation period of two to three years will be necessary before such an organisation runs efficiently and harmoniously. Particularly reporting-back frequently turns out to cause difficulties. After this, the manager may find himself less involved and his staff may cope with this "exception" as well.

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Reference

1. The Peter Principle, Dr. Laurence J. Peter. Raymond Hull, Pan Books, LTD, London.